

TT No. 14: *Andy Gallon* - Sat 25th August 2012; **Blaby & Whetstone Athletic v Heanor Town**; FA Cup Preliminary Rd; Res: 2-1; Att: 88; Admission: £5; Programme: £1 (20pp); FGIF Match Rating: **.

Most non-league clubs, in my experience, are happy to let photographers take pictures inside the ground before the turnstiles open. Ask politely, and they invariably let you in. At Warwick Road, home of Blaby & Whetstone Athletic, the chap sticking the corner flags into the turf surprised me by saying: "You know where you'd get a really good shot of the ground - from the clubhouse roof. I've got some ladders on my van." Now, I haven't a head for heights and, knowing my luck, I'd come crashing through into the bar below. "I'd better have a word with the health & safety guy," van man added in response to my raised eyebrows. A couple of minutes later, the proposed expedition was abandoned. "There'll be hell to pay if you fall off," was the outcome.

Even from a low perspective, I liked Warwick Road. It's more than I could say for dreary Whetstone, the club's home village, which did nothing to shake my opinion that Leicester (and I include the communities on or near its outer ring road) is England's dullest city. Trim and tidy Warwick Road boasts a couple of interesting stands. The larger, on the north touchline, has three rows of bench seats and the letters BWFC painted large in white on its blue back wall. The other, opposite and similarly off centre, is a curious dual facing affair providing cover for the main pitch and its neighbour, used by the club's numerous junior teams.

Despite being fairly open, the ground is tight for space on the north side, with a road (curiously named The Dicken) and Whetstone Cricket Club adjacent. The cricketers' second team were playing Sharnford in the Fourth Division of the Leicestershire Senior League. I watched for 10 minutes (that's about as much cricket as I can bear) and smiled at the characteristic collection of teenage boys and middle-aged men out in the middle. Do twenty and thirtysomethings actually play cricket?

Returning over the road to the football, there is room for Blaby to expand at the east end of their ground, but its south side is hemmed in by the second pitch, next to which is an obsolete all-weather surface. The aforementioned clubhouse, single storey, flat roofed and plug ugly, crowns a grassy rise behind the west end goal. The pay hut is alongside and accessed via a tiny car park. Bijou dug-outs, beyond which the north touchline is out of bounds, are positioned to the left of the seated stand. There is only partial hardstanding. The floodlights are of the mast variety and the pitch is railed off with a blue and white barrier. Liberal use of the club's colours neatly draws together Warwick Road's individual elements. A pleasant enclosure on a nice day, certainly.

It soon became obvious, however, that the ground does not offer enough cover when really needed. This was the first time Blaby had hosted an FA Cup tie and the

crowd (swelled by a respectable following from Heanor) was considerably above average. Don't, incidentally, believe the official attendance figure of 88. I counted 130 - and more arrived during the second half. I'd driven down the A1 and M1 through copiously heavy showers, but Whetstone (despite its name) appeared to have escaped the worst. Then, 10 minutes before kick-off, ominous thunder claps were heard. Within seconds, torrential rain and hail was bouncing down. Jags of lightning illuminated a coal black sky. The temperature plummeted. Quite a contrast to the hot sunshine of earlier! Everyone in the ground sprinted for what ports in the storm they could locate. The referee, clearly as health & safety conscious as the chap who rejected my rooftop excursion, kept the teams in the dressing rooms and delayed the start by six minutes. The downpour eased to the sort of drizzle beloved by Peter Kay.

The weather seemed to play a part in the teams' respective performances. Neither, truth be told, looked much good in the first half on a sodden pitch. Players at this level simply don't have the touch to cope with a ball that fizzed and skidded about like a poorly trained puppy. It pinged off shins, knees and elbows. The rain did not cease until half-time. Until then, Heanor, from the higher Northern Counties East League Premier Division, had looked a class above Blaby. The visitors took the lead in the eighth minute with a soft Nico Degirolamo header past strangely transfixed keeper Luke Hall. The central defender's effort trickled into an area of the goal which should have been protected by the home right-back. I see this sort of thing all the time, and it's bloomin' annoying. Full-backs should start concentrating on defending (surely their primary function), rather than being preoccupied with getting forward at every opportunity. Seven minutes later, Degirolamo's team-mate Stef Frost skipped round Hall, but his shot towards an empty net was cleared off the line by defender Matthew Howarth. Had that gone in, I've no doubt Heanor would have won the tie comfortably.

As it was, Blaby shone with the arrival of a scorching sun in the second half. What is it with our weather this summer? On a rapidly drying surface, the hosts were a team transformed. Heanor, on the other hand, collapsed unaccountably. With an hour of the game completed, Daniel Gallagher tapped in an equaliser from close range before, in the 75th minute, skipper Jermaine Gordon (cumbersome, though undoubtedly effective) drove the winner into the bottom corner of Simon Willie's net from 20 yards. The visitors, despite having plenty of late pressure, never looked like forcing a replay.

Blaby's Latin motto translates as No Reward Without Effort. They certainly put in a committed shift during the second half, but will need, I suspect, to produce more of a 90-minute display when they visit Northern Premier League Premier Division Eastwood Town in the next round. Heanor, apparently coasting to victory at half-time in this game, must be really kicking themselves at missing out on such a potentially lucrative and profile-raising derby.